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In the age of social media, drama travels fast.

Parents of pre-teens and teens whose doctors recommend they receive the cancer-preventing Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine might find plenty of unsubstantiated reasons on the internet to not get the vaccine: it's easy for stories—true or not—to be uploaded to a chat room and read across the globe in a matter of hours.

Careful answers to parents' basic concerns about safety and effectiveness take a lot longer. As a Congolese proverb reminds us: "Lies come up in the elevator; the truth takes the stairs but it gets here eventually."

The safety monitoring of HPV vaccine has been a long walk up many steps. We now have over a decade of surveillance data on vaccine reactions since the original version of vaccine was licensed in 2006.

There are some common reactions—irritation at the injection site may occur, and some patients may get a fever or headache. Before administering the vaccine, your doctor will check with you about any possible contraindications. Anyone who has had a previous allergic reaction to the vaccine, or who has an allergy to yeast, should not be given the vaccine. Severe allergic reactions are very rare—CDC estimates they may occur in around one in a million doses. Your doctor's staff will keep your child under observation for 15 minutes after the shot to treat possible fainting or anaphylactic reactions.

But the evidence is clear: for almost all adolescents, the benefits of HPV vaccine in preventing cancer and genital warts far outweigh the risks.

A study on HPV vaccine effectiveness done at the University of New Mexico by Dr. Cosette Wheeler and her colleagues found it to be even better than what scientists expected when the vaccine was introduced in 2006. Last year they reported in a
JAMA Oncology
article that the incidence of cervical neoplasia (abnormal cell growth on the cervix) among girls 15 to 19 years old decreased by about 50% from 2007 to 2014.

There's more good news for shot-shy pre-teens: Based on studies showing that only two doses of the vaccine provided protection for younger ages, CDC lowered the recommended number of doses this year from three to two for teens younger than 15.

New Mexico parents can face many difficult choices, but deciding to vaccinate their teens against cancer shouldn't be one of them. They can be confident in their doctor's recommendation to have them receive HPV vaccine at the same time as they get their other back-to-school shots.

Daniel Burke, MPH Brian Etheridge, MD, FAAP

NMDOH, Chief Infectious Disease Bureau President, NM Pediatric Society

William G. Liakos Jr, MD, FAAP Sharon Phelan, MD, FACOG

President, NM Medical Society Chair, NM Section of ACOG